WE BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH

November 1, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Revelation 7:9-17
Matthew 5:11-16

"Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. -Matthew 16:18(KJV)

What do you believe in, Christian?

I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ,
his only son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit.
I believe in the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins,
the communion of saints and the life everlasting.
And I believe in the holy Catholic Church.

How did that get in there? Sandwiched in the middle of the oldest Christian bill of particulars, The Apostles' Creed, in a series of affirmations which nobody much disputes, is an assertion so radical, that it really ought to choke us a bit everytime we say it. In a list of theological verities which can become opaque, is a reality so mundane we are sitting on its uncomfortable seats, smelling its odors, reposing beneath its high-vaulted, Gothic and very tangible roof... Church, Holy Catholic Church, Fourth Presbyterian Church, - old St. John's by the gas station... right up there with God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

In the pre-ecumenical age, some members of my family used to come to a screeching halt in their corporate affirmation of the historic Christian faith at the point of that "Holy Catholic" business. Oh, they knew that it was catholic with a small "c" meaning universal, not Roman Catholic, but just in case God was listening in they wanted to make very certain they got their institutional affiliation correct - "that's the Presbyterian version of the Holy Catholic Church, not St. Theresa's, thank you." And so they would substitute "Christian" for "catholic" - which is o.k., but redundant and it misses the point of catholicity. Or they would treat the word like a "rest" in music and stand tight lipped while others danced suggestively with Rome.

How did it get in there? It got in there because from the very beginning to believe in Jesus meant joining the company. It was not a matter of agreeing to ideas about him, nor has it been an emotional catharsis, nor, in the New Testament, at least, is it a matter of accepting Jesus as personal Lord and Savior... It has, from day one, been a matter of joining up. He said, "follow me: come along, join the company..." It's in the creed because the faith is corporate and always has been. But, in reality, if you want to get into a good argument, try telling a Presbyterian that you have to be a church member to be a Christian.

Besides, today, almost everybody agrees that the church is in trouble, that the mainline churches, the old Protestant establishments, have declined in numbers and influence. Certainly, when it comes to the ability to make news - which means selling newspapers, we can't hold a candle to the televangelists. Chicago scholar Dorothy Bass observed that "in the 1950's Time and Newsweek carried a story about a mainline denomination approximately every other week, while thirty years later almost none appeared." [Teaching with Authority? The Changing Place of Mainstream Protestantism in American Culture] The very day I read this Time magazine arrived. And you know how you always turn to People and Cinema and Sports before you plow into the World and the Nation? Well, ministers always check the Religion department which is there periodically. On October 19 this is what I found - as Time's presentation of the religious news of the week.

The headline read -"**Falwell Throws in Towel** - With PTL up for grabs, will prodigal Jim Bakker return?" The article, in Time's inimitable style, reported that Jerry Falwell had quit as head of PTL and the possible return of Bakker to the helm of the 172 million dollar empire.

Well - what does it mean when that's the religious news? As a life long Time reader, let me say that part of what it means, sadly, is that Time is capable of becoming the religious equivalent of the National Enquirer- "if it titillates, enough to sell magazines - report it." What it means is that mainline churches don't ordinarily make news that sells. What it does not mean, I would submit, is that the churches, the church - is in trouble. And one of the reasons I can come to that conclusion is that I mean it when I say I believe in the church.

There is a sense in which there has never been a time when the church has not been in trouble. One of the things the memory of the Protestant Reformation ought to suggest to us is that widespread dissatisfaction with the institutional church is not exactly a new phenomenon.

Karl Heim once quipped that... "The church is like a ship on whose deck festivities are still kept up and glorious music is heard, while deep below the waterline a leak has been sprung and masses of water are pouring in, so that the vessel is settling hourly though pumps are manned day and night."

Well maybe - and maybe not.

Another perspective is offered by Martin Marty... Dr. Marty completed the first of a four volume work in Modern American Religion this

year. Dr. Marty subtitled Volume I, The Irony Of It All and in the introduction observes that for centuries the decline of religion has been confidently predicted. Modern, urban secular culture would be inhospitable to religion... But - ironically, "instead of disappearing, religion, prospered in selected ways. Instead of dissolving in the face of jostling and erosion caused by American diversity, it relocated..."

But, the church - the College of Cardinals - the General Assembly... the Presbytyerian Women's group? Is that what Jesus meant? Jesus was a simple man, so the argument goes. His intent was to put people right with God and teach them to be forgiving and kind with each other. So what does the church - with its ritual and ceremony, its tradition and custom, its creeds and its rules - have to do with this remarkable life lived 2,000 years ago?

The church, of course, is not the only institution that suffers from a gap between its purpose and its actual practice. I've belonged to more than one PTA which seemed to exist for the purpose of raising money to send representatives to meetings to learn how to raise money to send representatives to meetings to learn how to raise money. The church knows it isn't perfect. The old saw about the church being full of hypocrites is true, of course. But inside, we acknowledge it, confess it even. In fact, we're the one institution that requires people to confess something less than perfection.

Our real distress about the church has to do with particularity. It's one thing to avow belief in the forgiveness of sin and the communion of saints, in the abstract. It's another thing to do that on Sunday morning surrounded by other people. C. S. Lewis's classic Screwtape Letters is a correspondence between a senior devil and his nephew about fighting for the soul of a new Christian. Listen to the devil - on the church:

"One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time. All your (man) sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic (building). When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with a rather oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy neither of them understands... When he gets to his pew and looks around him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew." [p. 8-9]

The church is distressingly particular. And there is a sense in which we are always more comfortable with safe abstractions. The love and compassion of Jesus is inspiring. But that man? Her? Wait a minute! We are inspired by the heroic strains of "The Church's One Foundation," but the meeting to plan the menu for the officers brunch leaves us cold.

Why the church? Religion is personal isn't it? This whole matter of my faith is an individual matter isn't it? Yes - and no. Of course it's personal and individual. But there is a deeper sense in which it is corporate and relational. American religion has always stressed the

personal side of the equation. Revivalism - is the religious expression of the American obsession with individualism, focusing entirely on the feelings and beliefs of the individual and building a whole movement with a life of it own, only peripherally related to the ongoing Christian enterprise and divorced entirely from the past... Typically revivalism dismissed all 2,000 years of church history and proposed that it was related directly to Jesus and the the Baptist and the disciples. Everything else has been a mistake. Televised religion is its modern reincarnation. You can participate, hear the Word, enjoy the music, get yourself saved and become a partner in the redemption of the world without leaving your easy chair except to get your checkbook... certainly without encountering another person.

Well, we believe in the church... the church catholic, the church triumphant, the church in all times and places. And we believe in the church here - this church - this people, here and now. We believe - church is as integral to Christian faith as is the rest of the creed.

It goes to the heart of our basic theology - our belief in God. What we know about God is the story of God and people. What we bet our life on is not a list of philosophic assertions, but a love story which begins on the edges of recorded history. "God creates people to keep him company," Black poet James Weldon Johnson said, "to be responsible, for God's sake, for the creation." God calls Abraham and Sarah and promises them descendants -lots of babies and people. God gets included with those people. God hears the people cry in bondage and sets them free. God enters into a covenant with them and promises to live with them intimately... "I will be your God and you will be a people - my people." That idea bound them together in a way no people before or after has been bound together.

When we say we believe in the church, we are saying that we believe God has always chosen people, has always made people into a community. We are saying something about our belief in God when we say we believe in the church.

We are saying that we believe Jesus intended a company, a new community of God's people to be the vehicle through which God would continue to live in his creation. We are saying that Jesus called men and women into that community. We are saying that the church is not an arbitrary organization to which we belong because we like the preacher or choir or architecture; but rather that the church is the way God gives us to say yes to Jesus Christ - and to participate in, actually to be a part of, the life of God in the world.

No one knows its imperfection better than church people. No one gets angrier with the church than those who love it. No one is more embarrassed by its occasional triviality, or more impatient with its timidity - than those who love it and believe in it. We - who are the church - do not need reminders of how large the gap is between our Lord's life and our life together.

But we may need an occasional reminder that in ways that are often intentionally quiet and discreet and modest - the church of Jesus Christ

lives and is worthy of our belief... There was religious news last week. There were things happening last week in the world of religion, far different from the machinations of the PTL. The week Falwell and Bakker were all the religion news Time could report -

...this single outpost of the church wrapped up an alternative school during the teachers' strike for 100 children -

...that week, - this church - counseled and gave food and found shelter for a hundred or so throw-away lives no one else in our culture cares about -

...that week this outpost opened its arms to senior adults, to troubled men and women -

...that week it put in motion plans to assist with the costly business of finding solutions for Chicago's homeless -

...that week it found a way to pay for more scholarships for promising Cabrini-Green kids -

...it tutored, taught, listened to and held in its arms an astonishing number of people for whom this church is the only reminder that their lives matter at all -

...that very week we brought a leading musician, a black author and exquisite music to our city, put sculpture on display on Michigan Avenue and of course, we learned and prayed and took care of one another.

That's only a part of it. It goes on in thousands and thousands of faithful churches in every town and city and rural crossroad in this country.

And in the meantime others of us, in other outposts in Asia, Africa, Central and South America - were healing, teaching, giving courage - and standing for freedom and dignity against some very strong opposition.

So I believe in the church. And I believe God means for there to be a church and Jesus calls us into a church, and I believe the gates of hell, as Matthew put it, will not prevail against it.

But I believe in the church because I continue to learn that the best faith in me is relational, does in fact push me into a world to be with God's children, pushes me into a community which is there for me.

During a fine speech about corporate ethics last Thursday morning, B. Kenneth West, head of Harris Bank Corp. said his dream for his organization was "to facilitate community." It was a stunning thought - community - a value which claims the dream of this leading banker.

That's what we're about, I thought. That's what we are and what we offer - community.

I was part of a special group of clergy privileged to spend time with some government officials in Washington recently. We were in the White House, seated around a table in the situation room of the National Security Council. Two clocks on the wall reminded us of the critical intensity of the place. One said - Washington. The other said - Persian Gulf.

We were meeting with the deputy director, General Colin Powell and his assistant, a young woman who happened to be a Presbyterian. General Powell told us that his work commanding a NATO Army, and now managing the National Security Council was not as difficult as helping the Episcopal Church in which he is a member and officer, try to sell a few acres of property and move a building.

But then his staff assistant began her remarks. She said, "Before I talk about the National Security Council, the Persian Gulf and Nicaragua, I'd like you ministers to know that my husband died of cancer a year ago. I could not have lived through that without my church. When I could not believe, and there were plenty of days when I couldn't, the church believed for me. When I felt utterly alone and abandoned, the church opened its arms and held me up and enabled me to go on another day."

It was a remarkable testimony, made even more powerful by the place in which it happened.

I believe in the church because of that. I believe in the church because God has given me those moments too - to witness and to receive. I believe because I have stood with several church members around the hospital bed of one of us who was dying; as we broke bread and shared the cup and held hands with her and prayed, she said - "Thank you all, I'll see you again." We knew we had been the church, as honestly as God ever gave us the privilege of being.

I believe because I have received. I believe because the reality of God has been given to me - not in the abstract - but by the church.

"The church," someone wrote recently, "is the community through which God says, 'I am here in the world with my grace.'" [Context, 10/1/87, Michael Kurtz]

So we believe - **in God the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, in the Holy Spirit, in the forgiveness of sins, the communion of saints, the life everlasting and the holy Catholic Church.** Amen.